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SUBJECT: STILL LUCID AT 97: GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP TALKS EDUCATION
WITH THE AMBASSADOR

Ref: 07 HANOI 1705

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Summary

1. (SBU) On April 25, the Ambassador and General Vo Nguyen Giap discussed efforts to increase educational exchanges between the United States and Vietnam. After imploring the Ambassador to work to bring the overall relationship to an even higher level, Giap echoed the Ambassador's desire to see more Vietnamese study in the United States. Giap also pleaded for the Ambassador's help in getting a U.S. university to open a branch in Vietnam. While the General repeated himself a few times during the 40 minute conversation, he left no doubt he is a fan of U.S. educational institutions. Giap is the hero of Vietnam's 1954 victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu and an icon in Vietnam who has remained somewhat politically active despite his 97 years of age. End Summary.

Context

2. (SBU) On April 25, the Ambassador met Vietnamese national hero and Ho Chi Minh's chief military strategist, General Vo Nguyen Giap, at the General's Hanoi home. Due to his age and frail health, Giap receives visitors only infrequently. In seeking this meeting with the General, our note underscored the Ambassador's desire to discuss bilateral educational exchanges. Giap has been outspoken about the need for reform of Vietnam's educational system, most recently last year issuing a public letter calling for systemic reform (Reftel).

3. (SBU) When the Ambassador and Poloffs arrived, Giap, his wife and son, and a few Party officials were waiting in a living room of the General's home. Giap, who did not get up from his seat, was dressed in military uniform. No press representatives were present. On the table in front of where the Ambassador and the General sat was a tape player that recorded the conversation -- perhaps indicating Party officials still feel compelled, despite Giap's advanced age, to keep tabs on what the General tells his foreign interlocutors. (Note: After sidelining Giap, then removing him from the Politburo in 1982, reportedly for his opposition to the invasion of Cambodia, Party rivals continued to monitor the General's activities and conversations. End Note.)

We Are Now Friends

4. (SBU) The General began by noting that the United States and Vietnam are enjoying peaceful relations, with Vietnam now hosting a fourth post-war American ambassador. Giap relayed that he met with most of the Ambassador's predecessors, who "demonstrated goodwill" towards Vietnam. Giap implored the Ambassador to bring the overall relationship to an even higher level. He said the GVN has achieved a lot of late and is "trying hard" in all areas. The Ambassador

responded that he shares the General's desire for better relations and pointed out that he is committed to doubling the number of Vietnamese students who study in the United States.

Zeroing In On Education

15. (SBU) The GVN is focused on improving its educational and scientific capabilities so the country can join the ranks of the developed countries, Giap said. Hanoi has progressed in the education area, but much needs to be done, he added. The increase in the number of Vietnamese exports heading to the United States is just an "initial development" in the relationship and economic ties are bound to grow, he offered. Giap said the most important thing -- pointing his finger in the air for emphasis -- is the "human element." The Communist Party has made improving Vietnam's educational system its number one priority, he stated.

16. (SBU) The United States and Vietnam could talk a lot, but "deeds are more important than words," the General continued. He asked that the Ambassador pay special attention to education because what has been done so far to get Vietnamese students to study in America "has not been sufficient." Although a large number of Vietnamese students are enrolled at U.S. educational institutions, this is just a start, he added. He averred that a U.S. university should establish itself in Vietnam. Perhaps it could be a joint U.S.-Vietnamese university, he said.

17. (SBU) The Ambassador responded that we have heard that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung also wants a U.S. university to set up in Vietnam. "You must have talked to him about this," the Ambassador said, which elicited laughter. The General replied that, from time to time, he does talk to the PM about education issues in Vietnam. Giap added that, on many occasions, he has made public his points on science and education.

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Comment: Approaching 100 But Still Lucid

18. (SBU) Giap repeated himself a few times during the 40 minute meeting, but spoke with clarity about the importance he attaches to education. With a doctorate in economics and as a former high school teacher whose daughter and grandchildren have studied at American universities, the General made clear that he sees U.S. educational institutions as important to Vietnam's future.

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